

Jonah 1:17

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/jonah/jonah-1/jonah-117/>

The LORD spares Jonah's life by appointing a great fish to swallow him. Jonah spends three days and three nights in the belly of the fish.

In the previous sections, we learned about Jonah's disobedience and the consequences of his disobedience. The LORD commissioned Jonah to Nineveh, but Jonah took a ship in the opposite direction, to Tarshish at the far western edge of the Mediterranean, to escape his mission. The LORD stopped Jonah from making his way to Tarshish by sending a great storm on the sea. The sailors unloaded the cargo to keep the ship from sinking and prayed to their gods. The captain woke Jonah up from his deep sleep and asked him to pray to his god.

Then, the sailors cast lots to determine the person responsible for the storm. The lot fell on Jonah, and he told the sailors to throw him into the sea to quiet the storm. The sailors tried their best to return to dry land, but they could not because the sea was becoming even stormier against them. Finally, they threw Jonah into the sea, and the sea suddenly stopped its raging. As a result, the sailors feared the LORD and worshiped Him (Jonah 1:1–16).

Verse 17, which begins the second chapter in the Hebrew text, picks up the story from verse 15, where the sailors threw Jonah into the sea. While the sailors perhaps thought that Jonah would perish in the sea, the LORD spared the life of His prophet. The LORD did so in a miraculous way. He *appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah*.

The word *appointed* is from the Hebrew verb “mānâ,” which can be translated as to “commission” or to “assign.” It occurs three more times in the book of Jonah, each time with God as the subject (4:6, 7, 8). The characteristic feature of all its occurrences expresses the power of command of a higher authority. The book of Daniel uses the verb to refer to the power of disposal of the Babylonian kings as the highest human authority (Daniel 1:5, 10; 2:24, 49; 3:12). Here in Jonah, the verb demonstrates that God alone has the power to do whatever He pleases. The LORD's power goes beyond all human comprehension and possibilities. Therefore, He commissioned a *great fish* to accomplish His will.

The word *fish* could designate any kind of sea-dwelling creature, including a whale. At any rate, the narrator tells us that the *fish* was a *great* sea creature. Despite the discomfort that Jonah could feel in the stomach of the fish, his life was secure. The *great fish* that swallowed Jonah was an instrument of deliverance for him. God's plan for Jonah was for him not to die in the sea but to preach a message of repentance to Nineveh. So, God deployed a sea creature to *swallow Jonah* to save him from drowning.

The verb *swallow* means to snatch something with the mouth and gulp it down through the esophagus. It speaks of eating and engorging food. In Job 20, for example, Zophar said of the wicked, “His food in his stomach is changed to the venom of cobras within him. He swallows

riches but will vomit them up. God will expel them from his belly” (Job 20:14–15). Here in Jonah, the LORD prepared the *fish* not to eat Jonah but to provide safety for him.

Unlike *Jonah*, who disobeyed the LORD’s command to go to Nineveh, the *fish* responded obediently to the voice of its Creator. Such a response echoes what the LORD stated in the book of Isaiah when He contrasted the domestic animals with the people of Israel: “An ox knows its owner and a donkey its master’s manger. But Israel does not, My people do not understand” (Isaiah 1:3). The *fish* unquestioningly obeyed the LORD and swallowed the prophet. So, *Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights*.

The phrase *three days and three nights* refers to the time it took the *fish* to reach the location where it would spit Jonah out. It does not require an exact 72-hour period (Esther 4:16). In the ancient world, it was an idiom for any portion of three calendar days. The phrase occurs in 1 Samuel to describe the time an unnamed Egyptian man spent without sustenance until David’s forces found him in a field and fed him (1 Samuel 30:12).

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus compared Jonah’s experience in the belly of the fish with his experience in the grave: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40). Jesus died at the ninth hour of the day prior to Passover, which would have been 3pm on a Friday (Mark 15:34-37). He rose early the third day, the first day of the week (Mark 16:2). Since He died Friday and rose Sunday, He is said to have risen on the third day, even though Jesus would have remained in the grave roughly 40 hours. So the fish’s journey to the point where he spit Jonah onto the land could have been a similar time, or longer.

Although Jonah’s languishing in the *great fish* parallels Jesus’s death on the cross, it also differs from it in some respects. First, Jonah remained alive in the belly of the *fish* until the third day, whereas Jesus went to paradise until He rose on the third day (Luke 23:43; 1 Corinthians 15:3–4). Second, Jonah was in the stomach of the *fish* because of his disobedience. However, Jesus was in the grave because of his complete obedience to the Father (John 6:38). It does seem that, at least in part, God chose to use Jonah to do His bidding in this instance in order to provide an illustrative prediction of Israel’s Messiah, who would be in the tomb for three days then be raised on the third day.

Biblical Text

¹⁷And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.